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Notes from Underground

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Study Guide



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Summary

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Summary: Chapter IV

The Underground Man arrives at the Hotel de Paris twenty-five minutes after dinner is supposed to begin, but he is the first to arrive. Discovering that Simonov has ordered dinner for six o'clock rather than five o'clock, he waits awkwardly in the restaurant, imagining that he is disgraced in the eyes of the waiters. When Zverkov arrives with the other dinner guests, he treats the Underground Man condescendingly. The Underground Man is appalled that Zverkov might genuinely consider himself superior to him. The other guests treat the Underground Man with awkward politeness, although they make derisive comments about his income and appearance. The Underground Man explodes at them, insisting that he is not embarrassed and that he will be paying for his dinner himself. The others are annoyed, and Trudolyubov insinuates that the Underground Man is an unwanted guest.

Feeling "crushed and annihilated," the Underground Man sits down and drinks sherry in silence as the others laugh and talk. He resents them and plans to leave. After a while, he delivers an offensive and pointless speech to Zverkov. Ferfichkin responds with a threat of violence, and the Underground Man challenges him to a duel. The others laugh, noting that the Underground Man is drunk. Once again, the Underground Man falls silent and tries to look indifferent and disinterested. Secretly, however, he wishes he could make peace with the other men.

The Underground Man watches the others drinking and making ridiculous conversation. He paces loudly back and forth in the dining room for three hours, but the other dinner guests ignore him. He considers how much he has humiliated himself, thinking about how the others do not

understand how developed and sensitive he is. When they do address a comment to him, the Underground Man guffaws disdainfully.

At eleven o'clock the other men make a move to leave. The Underground Man begs Ferfichkin's forgiveness, insisting that if they duel, he will give Ferfichkin the first shot and then fire into the air. The men answer him with contempt and leave together, planning to go to a brothel. The Underground Man insists that Simonov lend him six roubles so that he can accompany them. Simonov responds with scorn, but finally flings the money at the Underground Man and leaves. The Underground Man decides that if he cannot make the men beg for his friendship, he will slap Zverkov's face.

Summary: Chapter V

H here it is at last, the encounter with reality.... All is lost now!

See Important Quotations Explained

The Underground Man hires a peasant coachman to take him to the brothel where the others have gone, convinced that he can redeem himself by slapping Zverkov. In the coach, he imagines the events at the brothel: he will slap Zverkov and everyone will retaliate by beating him—even Olympia the prostitute, who once laughed in the Underground Man's face. Eventually, Zverkov will have to duel with the Underground Man. The Underground Man accepts that he will lose his job, and tries to figure out how he will pay for pistols and find a second for his duel. He does not have any close friends who will act as second, but he thinks that anyone he asks will be honor-bound to accept. He urges the coachman to go faster, but he is plagued by doubt.

If Zverkov refuses to duel, the Underground Man will bite him and allow himself to be sent to Siberia in disgrace. Years later, he will return from Siberia and nobly forgive Zverkov for his dishonor. The Underground Man then realizes that he has stolen this fantasy from the plot of popular Romantic stories. In despair, he considers turning back, but decides it is his fate to go on. He hits the coachman in the neck with impatience. As the carriage continues through the falling snow, the Underground Man feels that slapping Zverkov has become inevitable.

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